

THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF AFTER DONALD DAVIDSON

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Scholars in religious studies are increasingly drawing important insights from Davidson's philosophy of language. Unfortunately, the most prominent of Davidson's interpreters in religious studies have been Rortian neopragmatists who, I argue, have read into Davidson views which are not his own. This essay seeks to disentangle Davidson's stance from its neopragmatist interpretations. The goal is to understand his stance in order to see how one might approach the study of religious beliefs, and in particular religious metaphysical beliefs, from a Davidsonian perspective.

I am someone who has always been intrigued by religious teachings about what exists that are comprehensive in scope. The intellectual representatives of religious communities often seem to be interested in speaking of the objects and events of human lives not only insofar as they are the particular things they are but also insofar as they exemplify traits that they share with everything else that exists. They often seem to be interested, in other words, with the character of reality in general. Let me give one brief example. It is said that when Dogen Kigen, the Soto Zen Buddhist teacher, saw the incense from his mother's funeral, he was struck by the rising and dissipating smoke as emblematic of the temporality or impermanence of all things. And temporality or impermanence, Dogen elaborated, is an aspect of reality from which no entity is exempt. Impermanence is a characteristic of what is that is completely comprehensive; it is that without which nothing exists; it is the nature of things. Of course, Dogen was not interested in the nature of things solely as an intellectual exercise but rather as an aspect of transforming people to live in accord with it.¹ In any event, analogous statements can be found in other religious traditions in which "impermanence" is replaced by the influence of karma or God or Brahman or the Dao. In this paper I will skate over the fact that the term "metaphysics" means so many

¹ I examine Dogen's metaphysics in greater detail in Schilbrack (2000a).

different things to different people and will refer to religious claims about the nature of things as religious metaphysics.

Several interpreters of religion go so far as to *define* religion as that form of culture in which the metaphysical question about the comprehensive character of reality is explicitly asked and answered. I hope that, even if readers do not agree that the interest in metaphysics is so central to religion that it should be part of the very definition of religion, they will agree that this interest is widespread. I also hope that readers will agree that, although one finds religious metaphysics most clearly in religious doctrines and the writings of religious intellectuals, one doesn't only find it there. Some religious stories and rituals are designed to inculcate in people an awareness of the truth of these comprehensive teachings.²

The burden of this paper is that Donald Davidson's philosophy of language can shed a great deal of light on this widespread aspect of religion.³ This journal has produced important work showing the relevance of Davidson's philosophy of language to the study of religion (Godlove 1992; Penner 1995), and this essay seeks to build upon those more comprehensive papers. In the first part of this article I sketch Davidson's views on the relationship between words and the world. In the second part I spell out where my interpretation of Davidson differs from that of neopragmatists, which, I argue, can be distortedly one-sided. In the third and last section I outline the significance of Davidson's views for the study of religious beliefs.

1. *Davidson and realism*

In his essay "On the very idea of conceptual scheme", Davidson famously argues for the incoherence of what he calls scheme/content dualism. Scheme/content dualism is found in those philosophies that seek to divide thought into two parts: a conceptual system that our mind or our language provides, and the preconceptual content that the world provides. Davidson notes two basic ways in which philosophers have related the scheme to the content: they say either that

² I seek to show the relevance of metaphysics for the study of myths in Schilbrack (2000b).

³ This despite the lack of importance of religion to Davidson personally or philosophically (see Davidson 1999: 18-19). For an appreciative but critical examination of Davidson's influence on social scientific methods, see Henderson (1993).

one's conceptual scheme organizes content, or that the scheme fits it. To say that language "organizes" experience is to say that it divides up, systematizes, or gives form to the otherwise uninterpreted, formless content of our thoughts. My own metaphor for the organizing task is to say that one's conceptual scheme is like a pair of eyeglasses, because it is "through" one's conceptual scheme that the world is given. To say that language "fits" experience is to say that on this account it predicts, faces, or accounts for what is. My metaphor for the fitting of experience is on this account that language is like a map.

Davidson argues that neither way of accounting for the relation between the scheme and the content works. A conceptual scheme cannot organize the world (or "reality" or "nature") because to organize something implies that the something is plural. We can only organize distinct objects. As Davidson says, "[s]omeone who sets out to organize a closet organizes the things in it" (1984: 192). But *distinct* objects are already structured entities. They are not formless we-know-not-whats, waiting to be schematized by our minds or our language. Whether we speak of objects such as knives and forks, cabbages and kingdoms, or we speak of events such as losing a button or stubbing a toe, as soon as the world falls under a description—or as Davidson likes to say, as soon as part of the world is "individuated"—it can no longer play the role of unconceptualized content. Since it is impossible to identify what is getting organized except in the terms of the conceptual scheme, the idea that a conceptual scheme "organizes" founders on the problem of identifying something without interpreting it. It founders, in other words, because it appeals to an idea of a "raw" or noumenal world that is otherwise uninterpreted or preconceptual or theory-neutral.

Instead of saying that one's conceptual scheme organizes the world or that it organizes the objects and events in the world, one might seek to understand the relation between word and world by saying that sentences fit or map onto those objects and events. But Davidson argues that the fitting metaphor is equally faulty. To make sense of the idea of fitting, one requires something for whole sentences, not just singular terms, to fit. The sentence "The teacher made it to class on time", if true, must fit not just the teacher or the class but a complex section of space and time, what Rorty has called a "chunk of reality somehow isomorphic to that sentence" (1991: 137). It needs to fit the *fact* that the teacher made it to class on time. The problem here is how one can locate or individuate that fact,

apart from our conceptual scheme. As Davidson says: "One can locate individual objects, if the sentences happens to name or describe them, but even such location makes sense relative only to a frame of reference, and so presumably the frame of reference must be included in whatever it is [that a sentence fits]" (1990: 303). Once again, the scheme/content model founders on the impossible need to speak of the world apart from the concepts that would give sense to that reference.

If Davidson is right about the impossibility of scheme/content dualism (and in my judgement he is), then there is a nest of positions in modern philosophy that are subverted by his view.⁴ For example, if language cannot be said to fit the facts, because there are no facts in this sense, then we cannot explain what makes a sentence true by saying that it corresponds to the facts. Consequently, Davidson says, there can be no correspondence theory of truth. A second is that our propositional attitudes are taken by some to have content by virtue of being representations of the world. But if language cannot be said to fit the facts, because there are no facts in this sense to fit, then representationalism fails as a theory of content. Without intermediate entities for our sentences to fit, Davidson finds no sense in a representationalist theory of content or in a correspondence theory of truth.

Davidson gives a striking argument, drawn from Frege, that illustrates the problem with explaining truth as correspondence to the facts (1984: chap. 2-3; see also Evnine 1991: 180-182). Davidson argues that if one wants to say that "p" corresponds to the fact that p, then one must also be willing to say that "p" corresponds to facts other than p, such as q, as long as the sentences that replace "p" and "q" are logically equivalent and cannot differ in truth value, or differ only in that a singular term in p is replaced by a coextensive singular term in q. Davidson concludes that a sentence that corresponds to one fact must correspond to them all, or rather, that the allegedly distinguishable facts cannot really be distinguished. "[W]e may read the result of our argument as showing that there is exactly one fact. Descriptions like 'the fact that there are stupas in Nepal', if they describe at all, describe the same thing: The Great Fact. No point remains in distinguishing among various names of The Great fact when written after 'corresponds to'; we may as well settle for the single phrase 'corresponds to the Great Fact'" (1984: 42). If sentences

⁴ The next three paragraphs reflect Davidson (1990).

name anything, then they name the same thing. Consequently, to say that a sentence fits the facts is no explanation of truth, because which facts it fits cannot be untangled from The Great Fact.

Several commentators have noted that despite his iconoclasm Davidson repudiates only correspondence-to-facts theories and that he retains a version of correspondence in his approach to truth. And it is true that even in "The structure and content of truth" Davidson suggests that there is "no harm in the idea of correspondence as long as it is properly understood" (1990: 280).⁵ But under any name, the point does not change that without distinct entities for sentences to correspond to, it is not an explanation to say that a sentence is true because it agrees with the facts. It is simpler to say just that the sentence is true.

What are the implications of this view for realism? We have seen in these arguments that, for Davidson, the truth of our beliefs is not *completely* independent of language. For this reason, Davidson concludes that it is misleading to call his philosophy "realist". Realism, he has come to feel, suggests a radically non-epistemic view of truth, and he does not hold a radically non-epistemic view of truth. Even though Davidson's account of truth *is* non-epistemic—in the sense that holding a justified belief or a coherent set of beliefs is not enough to make them true, and there is no belief which may not be false—Davidson now rejects the realist label.

To summarize, I interpret Davidson as giving us good reasons why one cannot get outside one's beliefs and language in order to test whether those beliefs or that language corresponds to the way things are. In other words, I read "On the very idea" as an attack on the idea of noumena or the world as it is "in itself". I agree with Davidson that the very idea of a noumenal world that in principle cannot be described should fall out of philosophy altogether.

2. *Davidson and neopragmatism*

I think that until this point my account of Davidson has been in accord with the way that neopragmatist philosophers have inter-

⁵ If "The structure and content of truth" is elaborating but not eliminating the correspondence theory, then it continues Davidson's project in "True to the facts", where he argues that "the debilities of particular formulations of the correspondence theory ought not be held against the theory [as such]" (1984: 54).

preted Davidson. To be honest, a great deal of what I understand about Davidson's philosophy and its significance is due to the writings of Richard Rorty, and to those neopragmatists in religious studies like Jeffrey Stout, Wesley Robbins, and Nancy Frankenberry. Nevertheless, the more of Davidson I read, the more I have come to believe that neopragmatists have put forward some interpretations of Davidson's work that are not Davidsonian. I want to point out three.

The first and most serious misunderstanding is the idea that Davidson's approach is "coherentist" or anti-ontological. I believe that such an idea can be seen, for example, in Nancy Frankenberry's statement that Davidson's account of truth "allows us to talk about sentences instead of about objects" (1999: 514). Such statements suggest a very dualistic and language-imprisoned interpretation of Davidson's view of truth. It seems to reflect the view that if we can't make sense of representationalism, then we shouldn't say that our sentences refer to the world at all, but only to language.

If this is the neopragmatist view, such statements fail to avoid what Rorty calls "an overenthusiastic pragmatism which throws ... the World overboard" (1991: 152), and they go beyond Davidson's view and its implications. According to Davidson, we learn the meaning of terms by being conditioned to respond verbally to specific objects and events in the world. Similarly, we interpret others by connecting them to their environment. Because for Davidson we are always already related to the world in this causal way, our beliefs are in general veridical. Given this account of meaning, Davidson's account of truth is that truth is the relations of sentences to sequences of objects and events in the world as spelled out with Tarskian satisfaction conditions. The notion of satisfaction is not a relation of sentences to special entities like facts or states of affairs, but it *is* a relation between words and the world. Hence Davidson says that "the truth of an utterance depends on ... how the world is arranged. ... Two interpreters, as unlike in culture, language, and point of view as you please, can disagree over whether an utterance is true, but only if they differ about how things are in the world" (1990: 309). Whether or not one speaks of this as a "correspondence theory of a sort",⁶ one cannot drop the relations to the world out, for according to Davidson "there is no way to give such a theory [i.e., a Tarskian theory] without employing a concept like reference or satisfaction

⁶ The phrase is Davidson's (1990:302).

which relates expressions to objects in the world" (1990: 302).⁷ This is also the significance of Davidson's arguments with Quine that the propositional content and meaning of observation sentences depend not on the proximal but on the distal stimulus, which is to say, not on sense data but on the objects and events in the world.

Those who hope or fear that Davidson's repudiation of scheme/content dualism involves the rejection of all possible senses of representation, correspondence, and realism should note a recent paper by Stephen Neale. Neale points out that, although in "On the very idea" Davidson rejects the ideas (1) that language organizes the world in general, (2) that it organizes distinct parts of the world, and (3) that it fits distinct parts of the world, he never rejects the fourth possible idea, that sentences fit, represent, or correspond to the world in general. Neale holds that, for Davidson, the world exists independently of our thought and language and that it is the world in general that makes sentences true.

Neale's point is commonsensical:

"Suppose that a simple sentence 'Smith is sitting' is true. Then surely, given the meaning of the sentence, it is true because of 'how the world is arranged': one of the entities in the world, Smith, is sitting. Indeed, this much is given by a Davidsonian truth theory (and no appeal to an alternative set of axioms will alter this fact). So the world makes the sentence true in at least this sense: if the world had been arranged differently—i.e., if the things in the world had been arranged differently (for the world to be arranged, the things in it must be arranged)—if Smith were, say, standing, the sentence 'Smith is sitting' would not be true. Denying this would drain all content from the concept of truth that permeates Davidson's writings" (Neale 1999: 663).

There is no reference here to raw sensations, facts, or things in themselves. Just the object, Smith.

It is telling that in his response Davidson not only concurs with Neale, saying "I gave no argument against saying the world makes some sentences true", and retracts his claim that the world does not make our sentences true as a mistake. He also explicitly links his willingness to speak of the world to a warning about neopragmatist interpretations of his work. "We cannot explain how language works

⁷ Davidson has made this same point for some time: "theories of truth of the kind considered here do require that a relation between entities and expressions be characterized ('satisfaction'). It is not easy to see how a satisfactory route to truth can escape this step if the language the theory treats has the usual quantificational resources" (1984: xv).

without invoking an ontology ... Rorty has misunderstood me if he believes I ever thought otherwise" (1999b: 668, 669).

In the light of Neale's clarification of Davidson, it pays to return to Davidson's use of Frege's argument. Recall that Davidson uses Frege to argue that if a sentence corresponds to a fact, then it corresponds to all of them, the Great Fact. This argument appears to be a *reductio* of correspondence arguments, because if the truth of a sentence cannot be explained by its reference to its own particular fact, then the sense of "corresponds" seems to drop out. But the Frege argument can also be read as support for Neale's view on representing. To say that a sentence refers to The Great Fact is another way of saying that true sentences *are* made true. They are made true not by particular facts—these still cannot be individuated—but by the world in general, by that which is, by the Great Fact. It remains true that this does not introduce entities to correspond to individual sentences, and so it does not give us a definition of truth, but it does clarify that for Davidson ontology does not fall out. On his account, our true sentences are about the world.⁸

Although our knowledge of the world is dependent on language in general in the sense that we have no access to the world apart from our language (and therefore nothing can justify a belief but another belief), this view is not radically epistemic (or "anti-realist") since the world is independent of individual sentences in the sense that any sentence can be false. A. C. Genova has helpfully labeled Davidson's view a "modestly non-epistemic" concept of truth (1999: 172). On this interpretation, Davidson is therefore not "beyond realism and anti-realism" in the sense that he dissolves or ignores the question of how we can speak of the objective, extra-linguistic world. He considers this a real question.⁹ Davidson is beyond realism and antirealism only in the sense that he has considered the question legitimate and even important, but has found an answer that is so balanced that it fits neither of the other two extreme positions.

⁸ I want to thank Terry Godlove for bringing to my attention this possible use of the Frege argument.

⁹ Davidson has written of Rorty: "Where we differ, if we do, is on whether there remains a question how, given that we cannot 'get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence,' we nevertheless can have knowledge of, and talk about, an objective public world which is not of our own making. I think this question does remain, while I suspect that Rorty doesn't think so" (1986: 310). Rorty agrees that he does not think this a good question (1990: 136-137).

This interpretation of Davidson as modestly non-epistemic accounts for his repeated use of the allegedly forbidden phrase “makes true”, for example, in his statement that “it is no accident that ‘Schnee ist weiss’ is true if and only if snow is white; it is the whiteness of snow that *makes* ‘Schnee ist weiss’ true” (1984: xiv; emphasis in the original). One sees this phrase again in the often-quoted statement that “all the evidence there is is just what it takes to make our sentences or theories true. ... *That* experience takes a certain course, that our skin is warmed or punctured, that the universe is finite, these facts, if we like to talk this way, make our sentences and theories true” (1984: 194; emphasis in the original). Davidson goes on to say, as one would expect, that “this point is put better without mention of facts”, but the point cannot be made at all without mention of the world as that which makes true sentences true.

Thus Davidson’s approach not only countenances, it requires an extra-linguistic reality. Why do neopragmatists not follow Davidson here? I’m not sure. On the one hand, there is nothing that is essential to pragmatism that requires anti-realism, even when pragmatism is combined with an anti-foundationalism or an anti-metaphysical stance or whatever it is exactly that makes it “neo”. This is crystal-clear in the neopragmatic humanism of Wesley Robbins (see, *inter alia*, Robbins 1998, 1999) which shows no sign of anti-realism or “cosmic estrangement”. According to Robbins, our beliefs and desires can no more vary independently of the rest of the world than our bodies can, and this kind of world-submerged position is wholly Davidsonian.

Nevertheless, when Davidson closes “On the very idea” with the sentence that “[i]n giving up the dualism of scheme and world, *we do not give up the world*, but re-establish unmediated touch with [it]” (1984: 198; emphasis added), Rorty calls this “the world well lost” (Rorty 1982). And when Davidson wants to “insist that knowledge is of an objective world independent of our thought and knowledge” and distinguishes his position from Rorty’s by reiterating that “we can have knowledge, and talk about, an objective public world that is not of our making” (1986: 307, 310), Rorty calls this “no more than out-dated rhetoric” (Rorty 1991: 149).¹⁰

¹⁰ Two critical treatments of Rorty’s appropriation of Davidson (though they pre-date “The structure and the content of truth”) are Maria Baghramian (1990) and Dorothea Frede (1987).

My own view is that the neopragmatists need not fear Davidson's references to the world. Davidson will never appeal to privileged experiences that cannot be conceptualized or that provide indubitable knowledge. Nevertheless, Davidson does hold the modestly non-epistemic position that even though one must speak of the world under a description, it is still the world that one speaks of. Neopragmatists can avoid this language-imprisoned and anti-realist way of making their points—and if they want to be Davidsonian, they have to.

There are two more points at which I think the neopragmatists misrepresent Davidson. Neopragmatists regularly suggest that Davidson is their ally in their rejection of metaphysics, that Davidson is in the non-metaphysical pragmatist camp. (Here Wesley Robbins is guilty.) But since Davidson does not consider talk about what the world is like illegitimate, there is no reason to think that he considers talk about what the world is like in general illegitimate. Moreover, Davidson is explicitly a proponent of metaphysics. As he says in "The method of truth in metaphysics", an article widely cited in general but rarely cited by neopragmatists, "by studying the most general aspects of language we will be studying the most general aspects of reality" (1984: 201). Of course, to express an interest in metaphysics does not keep Davidson from being a pragmatist; on the contrary, Davidson's language in this quote recalls John Dewey's interest in studying the generic features of reality. But it does keep him from being a neopragmatist. They may consider Davidson's endorsement of metaphysics "bad Davidson", or they may think that opposing metaphysics is what Davidson "should have said", but honesty requires that Davidson not be put forward as a non-metaphysical philosopher.

My last point is that neopragmatists sometimes assert that Davidson's rejection of scheme/content dualism invalidates transcendental arguments. Rorty says, with some paradox, that Davidson gives us a transcendental argument to end all transcendental arguments.¹¹ Frankenberry says (perhaps trying to avoid the paradox) that to agree that the very idea of conceptual schemes is unintelligible "amount[s] to giving up all transcendental arguments" (1999: 528). Again, I think that this misrepresents Davidson's work.

¹¹ Rorty argues against the intelligibility of transcendental arguments (without reference to Davidson) in Rorty (1971).

In the interests of full disclosure, I admit that this is the weakest of my three points because Davidson has not explicitly said that he endorses transcendental arguments. He has said that his work “*can be* justified by a transcendental argument” (1984: 72; emphasis added), which certainly sounds as if he thinks transcendental arguments are possible, and he refers his readers to “On the very idea of a conceptual scheme” and to “The method of truth in metaphysics”. Moreover, it seems to me that the most natural way to understand Davidson’s project is as an analysis of the transcendental conditions for the possibility of interpretation. This is how William Maker reads Davidson, as does Carol Rovane, Michael Root, J. E. Malpas, A. C. Genova, Dorothea Frede, and others who spell out in detail what they call the transcendental features of Davidson’s arguments. Rather than simply asserting that Davidson opposes transcendental arguments, it would be good to see the neopragmatists enter this debate.

3. *Davidson and religious belief*

What light can Davidson shed on the study of religious belief? The pioneer on this question is Terry Godlove (1984, 1989, 1994). One of Godlove’s central arguments is that Davidson makes it possible for us to account for the diversity of religious belief without invoking the framework model that leads to relativism. Godlove shows those in religious studies how, with Davidson, one can say that any diversity of religious belief presupposes a background of shared belief. Divergence of belief in general must be relatively limited and this carries over into religion. Divergence over religious matters will also be relatively limited, and it will concern abstract or (as Godlove calls them) “theoretical” issues. Thus religious beliefs may have what Godlove helpfully labels an “interpretive priority” for a believer, in the sense that their religious beliefs can come to bear on their interpretation of all (or most) of the objects and events in their lives. But one should not say that religious beliefs have an epistemic priority, in the sense that they provide a framework or conceptual scheme through which a believer’s world is organized for all the reasons that Davidson gives. In my judgement, this distinction between interpretive priority and epistemic priority is an invaluable tool for religious studies.

The question I want to pursue builds upon this repudiation of the framework model. My question is: after Davidson, what can we say

that religious beliefs are *about*? In answering this question I want to bring to the study of religious beliefs the conclusions I reached above concerning beliefs in general. This is to say that religious beliefs cannot violate the strictures given in "On the very idea", but they can have the following character: first, they can refer to the world, to extra-linguistic reality: "Jesus rose from the dead" is true if and only if Jesus rose from the dead. Second, they can be metaphysical in the sense that they can seek to describe what Davidson calls the large features of reality. Third (though this is a point I will not develop in this article), they can be supported by transcendental arguments. On a Davidsonian view, therefore, religious beliefs can be understood as seeking to describe the general character of reality, where "reality" means an objective world independent of our thought and knowledge. In short, Davidson enables the study of religious metaphysics.

What does the study of religious metaphysics look like, after Davidson? For some, the term "metaphysics" refers to a view of the world precisely in the sense of a conceptual scheme, and a religious metaphysics would be a religious conceptual scheme. On this interpretation, the study of language or culture reveals a system of concepts or categories with which a people structure their universe. Benjamin Lee Whorf, for example, writes that "[t]he Hopi language and culture conceals a metaphysics, such as our so-called naive view of space and times does, or as the relativity theory does; yet it is a different metaphysics from either. In order to describe the structure of the universe according to the Hopi, it is necessary to attempt—insofar as it is possible—to make explicit this metaphysics, properly describable only in the Hopi language" (1956: 58). Davidson's criticism of scheme/content dualism is designed to undercut precisely this kind of conceptual schemes—in fact, Davidson (1984: 190) points to Whorf as an offender—and so Davidson clearly rejects religious metaphysics in this sense. There cannot be metaphysics in this sense because the idea that the metaphysical scheme organizes or fits experience cannot be cashed out. Similarly, there cannot be incommensurable or alternative metaphysical schemes because nothing could count as evidence that the metaphysical beliefs cannot be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that activity was not speech behavior.

For other people, the term "metaphysics" refers not to a conceptual scheme but to a special kind of content. On this view, metaphysical beliefs are beliefs about the noumenal or supernatural world.

They “transcend” the ordinary world of human experience. (I assume that this was the view held by the bookstore clerk who tried to help me find Peter Van Inwagen’s book *Metaphysics* by scanning the section marked “Occult”.)

In both of these senses of the term “metaphysics” is entangled in the scheme/content dualism that characterizes so much theory in religion. It is no surprise that Davidson objects to understandings of metaphysics that turn on this dualism. But it is another question whether Davidson objects to metaphysics that does not.

So to repeat my question, what does the study of religious metaphysics look like, after Davidson?

I want to approach my answer to this question by beginning with a homey, non-religious, and non-metaphysical example. Imagine a swimming hole hidden away in the Ozark Mountains on a sweltering summer day. A person steps into the water and is surprised by the fact that, where she stepped in, the water is actually bone-chillingly cold. Suppose this person speculates to herself, “I bet this water is this cold not only here at my ankles, but throughout this swimming hole”. She is thinking something like: every part of this pool is bone-chillingly cold. If she thinks in philosopher-ese, she may think “this pool as such is cold” or “every part of this pool is characterized by being cold”.

Here is a claim about the comprehensive character of something. It is not an attempt to discover the pool’s own preferred self-description. It does not imply the existence of *tertium*, philosophical intermediaries, nor any facts isomorphic to this sentence. The sentence that “this pool as such is cold” is true if and only if this pool as such is cold. “Every part of this pool is characterized by being cold” is true if and only if every part of this pool is characterized by being cold. But if these sound like legitimate statements, fully permissible on Davidson’s account, then statements like the following would be equally legitimate: “Reality as such is cold” or “Every part of reality is characterized by being cold”. These are putative metaphysical statements, making claims about the general character of reality, though they are not very good ones and can be straightforwardly falsified. The point is only that such metaphysical claims are not ruled out by Davidson’s understanding of language. But here is a putative statement of religious metaphysics that I believe to be equally acceptable on Davidson’s terms: “Every part of reality is characterized by being impermanent”. This statement is much more

difficult to disprove, but my goal is not to argue for or against any particular statement of religious metaphysics but only to show their legitimacy from a Davidsonian point of view.

From a Davidsonian perspective, then, religious metaphysics can be seen as beliefs (or systems of beliefs) about the world. One need not see religious metaphysics as “mystical”, mysterious, nor necessarily wedded to assumptions about schemeless content. Metaphysical beliefs are distinctive insofar as they are unrestricted and seek to describe the character of reality as such. As Godlove puts it, “the encompassing character of religious belief” reflects the fact that religious teachings seek to describe how things are in such an abstract or theoretical way that they provide conceptions of a general order of existence (1989: 106). Metaphysical claims may not be easy to interpret. Precisely because they are held true in any and all observable circumstances, religious beliefs made at this level of abstraction can raise difficulties for an interpreter (see Godlove 1994). But the idea that religious beliefs about the general character of reality raise more interpretive challenges than religious beliefs about empirical matters is not news. More work needs to be done on how a field linguist might make sense of such claims, but this does not change the general point: religious metaphysics are intelligible on Davidsonian criteria.

Here is one last observation in closing. Davidson calls scheme/content dualism a dogma of empiricism and it is not clear why repudiating a dogma of an anti-metaphysical tradition is itself supposed to be an anti-metaphysical move. On the contrary, scheme/content dualism has been employed precisely to block metaphysical inquiry into the nature of things, on the grounds that the things in themselves are on the far side of our conceptual scheme and so forever inaccessible to our knowledge. By rejecting scheme/content dualism, Davidson does not invalidate metaphysics. On the contrary, Davidson makes metaphysical inquiry legitimate again—or more precisely, he shows how the modern (and postmodern) antipathy to metaphysics and to religious metaphysics in particular depends on a dualism that is no longer tenable.

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